SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER XX.—When his uncle went abroad to fill a consular post at $1,500 a year and he himself became a clerk in old Frank Bronson's law office at eight dollars a week, George was lonely, indeed. The prospect of his future life with silly Aunt Fanny is appalling, and he realizes, also, the full measure of his unthinking cruelty to his mother.

CHAPTER XXI.—Seeing the impossibility of the two of them living on his $8 a week, George goes to work for a big chemical company and is put in charge of the nitro-glycerin department.

CHAPTER XXII.—The industrial growth of the town completely wipes out the "Amberson Addition," the very name disappearing from the archives. George's heart is broken. In a fit of abstraction George is run over by an auto, having both his legs broken, and suffering internal injuries. He is taken to the City hospital.

had lived here—in this alley he had fought with two boys at the same time, and whipped them; in that front yard he had been successfully teased into temporary insanity by a Sunday school class of pinky little girls. On that sagging porch a laughing woman had fed him and other boys with doughnuts and gingerbread; yonder he saw the staggered relics of the iron picket fence he had made his white pony jump, on a dare, and in the shabby, stone-faced house behind the fence he had gone to children's parties, and, when he was a little older he had danced there often, and fallen in love with Mary Sharon, and kissed her, apparently by force, under the stairs in the hall. The double front doors, of meaninglessly carved walnut, once so glossily varnished, had been painted smoke gray, but the smoke grime showed repulsively, even on the smoke gray; and over the doors a smoked sign proclaimed the place to be a "Stag hotel."

This was the last "walk home" he was ever to take by the route he was now following: up National avenue to Amberson addition and the two big old houses at the foot of Amberson boulevard; for tonight would be the last night that he and Fanny were to spend in the house which the Major had forgotten to deed to Isabel. Tomorrow they were to "move out," and George was to begin his work in Bronson's office. He had not come to this collapse without a fierce struggle—but the struggle was inward, and the rolling world was not agitated by it, and rolled calmly on. For of all the "ideals of life" which the world, in its jesting, inconsiderately flattens out to nothingness, the least likely to retain a profile is that ideal which depends upon inheriting money. George Amberson, in spite of his record of failures in business, had spoken shrewdly when he realized at last that money, like life, was "like quicksilver in a nest of cracks." And his nephew had the awakening experience of seeing the great Amberson estate vanishing into such a nest—in a twinkling; it seemed, now that it was indeed so utterly vanished.

On this last homeward walk of his, when George reached the entrance to Amberson addition—that is, when he came to where the entrance had formerly been—he gave a little start, and halted for a moment to stare. This was the first time he had noticed that the stone pillars, marking the entrance, had been removed. Then he realized that for a long time he had been conscious of a queerness about this corner without being aware of what made the difference. National avenue met Amberson boulevard here at an obtuse angle, and the removal of the pillars made the boulevard seem a cross street of no overpowering importance—certainly it did not seem to be a boulevard!

George walked by the Mansion hurriedly, and came home to his mother's house for the last time.

Emptiness was there, too, and the closing of the door resounded through bare rooms; for downstairs there was no furniture in the house except a kitchen table in the dining room, which Fanny had kept "for dinner," she said, though as she was to cook and serve that meal herself George had his doubts about her name for it. Upstairs, she had retained her own furniture, and George had been living in his mother's room, having sent everything from his own to the auction. Isabel's room was still as it had been, but the furniture would be moved with Fanny's to new quarters in the morning. Fanny had made plans for her nephew as well as herself; she had found a "three-room kitchenette apartment" in an apartment house where several old friends of hers had established themselves—elderly widows of citizens once "prominent" and other retired gentry. People used their own "kitchenettes" for breakfast and lunch, but there was a table-d'hote arrangement for dinner on the ground floor; and after dinner bridge was played all evening, an attraction powerful with Fanny. She had "made all the arrangements," she reported, and nervously appealed for approval, asking if she hadn't shown herself "pretty practical" in such matters. George acquiesced absent-mindedly, not thinking of what she said and not realizing to what it committed him.

He began to realize it now, as he wandered about the dismantled house; he was far from sure that he was willing to live in a "three-room apartment" with Fanny and eat breakfast and lunch with her (prepared by herself in the "kitchenette") and dinner at the table d'hote in "such a pretty Colonial dining room" (so Fanny described it) at a little round table they would have all to themselves in the midst of a dozen little round tables which other relics of disrupted families would have all to themselves. For the first time, now that the change was imminent, George began to develop before his mind's eye pictures of what he was in for; and they appalled him. He decided that such a life verged upon the sheerly unbearable, and that after all there were some things left that he just couldn't stand. So he made up his mind to speak to his aunt about it at "dinner," and tell her that he preferred to ask Bronson to let him put a sofa-bed, a trunk and a folding rubber bathtub behind a screen in the dark rear room of the office.

But at "dinner" Fanny was nervous, and so distressed about the failure of her efforts with sweetbreads and macaroni; and she was so eager in her talk of how comfortable they would be "by this time tomorrow night,"

After "dinner" he went upstairs, moving his hand slowly along the smooth walnut railing of the balustrade. Half way to the landing he stopped, turned, and stood looking down at the heavy doors masking the black emptiness that had been the library. Here he had stood on what he now knew was the worst day of his life; here he had stood when his mother passed through that doorway, hand-in-hand with her brother, to learn what her son had done.

He went on more heavily, more slowly; and, more heavily and slowly still, entered Isabel's room and shut the door. He did not come forth again, and bade Fanny good-night through the closed door when she stopped outside it later.

"I've put all the lights out, George," she said. "Everything's all right."

"Very well," he called. "Good night, Aunt Fanny."

His voice had a strangled sound in spite of him; but she seemed not to notice it, and he heard her go to her own room and lock herself in with bolt and key against burglars. She had said the one thing she should not have said just then: "I'm sure your mother's watching over you, Georgie." She had meant to be kind, but it destroyed his last chance for sleep that night. He would have slept little if she had not said it, but since she had said it he did not sleep at all. For he knew that it was true—if it could be true—that his mother, if she still lived in spirit, would be weeping on the other side of the wall of silence, weeping and seeking for some gate to let her through so that she could come and "watch over him."

He felt that if there were such gates they were surely barred: they were like those awful library doors downstairs, which had shut her in to begin the suffering to which he had consigned her.

The room was still Isabel's. Nothing had been changed: even the photographs of George, of the Major and of "brother George" still stood on her dressing table, and in a drawer of her desk was an old picture of Eugene and Lucy, taken together, which George had found but had slowly closed away again from sight, not touching it. Tomorrow everything would be gone; and he had heard there was not long to wait before the house itself would be demolished. The very space which tonight was still Isabel's room would be cut into new shapes by new walls and floors and ceilings; yet the room would always live, for it could not die out of George's memory. It would live as long as he did, and it would always be murmurous with a tragic, wistful whispering.

And if space itself can be haunted, as memory is haunted, then some time, when the space that was Isabel's room came to be made into the small bedrooms and "kitchenettes" already designed as its destiny, that space might well be haunted and the new occupants come to feel that some seemingly causeless depression hung about it—a wraith of the passion that filled it throughout the last night that George Minafer spent there.

Whatever remnants of the old high-handed arrogance were still within him, he did penance for his deepest sin that night—and it may be that to this day some impressionable, overworked woman in a "kitchenette," after turning out the light, will seem to see a young man kneeling in the darkness, shaking convulsively, and, with arms outstretched through the wall, clutching at the covers of a shadowy bed. It may seem to her that she hears the faint cry, over and over:

"Mother, forgive me! God, forgive me!"

CHAPTER XXI.

At least it may be claimed for George that his last night in the house where he had been born was not occupied with his own disheartening contemplations of the future, but with sorrow for what sacrifices his pride and youth had demanded of others. And early in the morning he came downstairs and tried to help Fanny make coffee on the kitchen range.

"There was something I wanted to say to you last night, Aunt Fanny," he said.

"Why—why—" she stammered; but she knew what he was going to say, and that was why she had been more and more nervous. "Hadn't—perhaps—perhaps we'd better get the—the things moved to the little new home first, George. Let's—"

He interrupted quietly, though at her phrase, "the little new home," his pungent impulse was to utter one loud shout and run. "It was about this new place that I wanted to speak. I've been thinking it over and I've decided. I want you to take all the things from mother's room and use them and keep them for me, and I'm sure the little apartment will be just what you like; and with the extra bedroom probably you could find some woman friend to come and live there and share the expense with you. But I've decided on another arrangement for myself, and so I'm not going with you. I don't suppose you'll mind much, and I don't see why you should mind—particularly, that is. I can't imagine you, or anyone else, being much attached to me, so—"

He stopped in amazement: no chair had been left in the kitchen, but Fanny gave a despairing glance around her in search of one, then sank abruptly and sat flat upon the floor.

"What on earth—" George sprang to her. "Get up, Aunt Fanny!"

"I can't. I'm too weak. Let me alone, George!" And as he released the wrist he had seized to help her she uttered the dismal prophecy which for days she had been matching against her hopes: "You're going to leave me—in the lurch!"

"Why no, Aunt Fanny!" he protested. "At first I'd have been something of a burden on you. I'm to get eight dollars a week; about thirty-two a month. The rent's thirty-six dollars a month, and the table d'hote dinner runs up to over twenty-two dollars apiece, so with my half of the rent—eighteen dollars—I'd have less than nothing left out of my salary to pay my share of the groceries for all the breakfasts and luncheons. You see you'd not only be doing all the housework and cooking, but you'd be paying more of the expenses than I would."

She stared at him with such a forlorn blankness as he had never seen. "I'd be paying—" she said feebly. "I'd be paying—"

"Certainly you would. You'd be using more of your money than—"

"My money!" Fanny's chin drooped upon her thin chest and she laughed miserably. "I've got twenty-eight dollars. That's all."

"You mean until the interest is due again?"

"I mean that's all," Fanny said. "I mean that's all there is. There won't be any more interest because there isn't any principal."

"Why you told—"

She shook her head. "No. I haven't told you anything."

"Then it was Uncle George. He told me you had enough to fall back on. That's just what he said: 'to fall back on.' He said you'd lost more than you should in the headlight company, but he'd insisted that you should hold out enough to live on, and you'd very wisely followed his advice."

"I know," she said weakly. "I told him so. He didn't know, or else he'd forgotten how much Wilbur's insurance amounted to, and I—oh, it seemed such a sure way to make a real fortune out of a little—and I thought I could do something for you, George, if you ever came to need it—and it all looked so bright I just thought I'd put it all in. I did—every cent except my last interest payment—and it's gone."

"Good Lord!" George began to pace up and down the worn planks of the bare floor. "Why on earth did you wait till now to tell such a thing as this?"

"I couldn't till I had to," she said piteously. It wouldn't do any good—not any good on earth." She got out her lace handkerchief and began to cry. "Nothing does any good, I guess, in this old world! Oh, how tired of this old world I am! I didn't know what to do. I just tried to go ahead and be as practical as I could, and arrange some way for us to live. Oh, I knew you didn't want me, George! I can see that much! You don't suppose I want to thrust myself on you, do you? It isn't very pleasant to be thrusting yourself on a person you know doesn't want you—but I knew you oughtn't to be left all alone in the world; it isn't good. I knew your mother'd want me to watch over you and try to have something like a home for you—I knew she'd want me to do what I tried to do!" Fanny's tears were bitter now, and her voice, hoarse and wet, was tragically sincere. "Oh! and now—you don't want—you want—you want to leave me in the lurch! You—"

"Oh, my Lord!" He went to her and lifted her. "For God's sake get up! Come, let's take the coffee into the other room and see what's to be done."

He got her to her feet; she leaned upon him, already somewhat comforted, and, with his arm about her, he conducted her to the dining room and seated her in one of the two kitchen chairs which had been placed at the rough table. "There!" he said. "get over it!" Fanny's spirits revived appreciably: she looked up with a plaintive eagerness. "I had bought all my fall clothes, George," she said; "and I paid every bill I owed. I don't owe a cent for clothes, George."

"That's good," he said wanly, and he had a moment of physical dizziness that decided him to sit down quickly. For an instant it seemed to him that he was not Fanny's nephew, but married to her. He passed his pale hand over his paler forehead. "Well, let's see where we stand," he said feebly. "Let's see if we can afford this place you've selected."

Fanny continued to brighten. "I'm sure it's the most practical plan we could possibly have worked out, George—and it is a comfort to be among nice people. I think we'll both enjoy it, because the truth is we've been keeping too much to ourselves for a long while. It isn't good for people."

"I was thinking about the money, Aunt Fanny. The rent is thirty-six dollars a month; the dinner is twenty-two and a half for each of us, and we've got to have some provision for other food. We won't need any clothes for a year, perhaps—"

"Oh, longer!" she exclaimed. "So you see—"

"I see that forty-five and thirty-six make eighty-one," he said. "At the lowest, we need a hundred dollars a month—and I'm going to make thirty-two."

"I thought of that, George," she said confidently, "and I'm sure it will be all right. You'll be earning a great deal more than that very soon."

"I don't see any prospect of it—not till I'm admitted to the bar, and that will be two years at the earliest."

"Well, there's the six hundred dollars from the sale. Six hundred and twelve dollars it was."

"It isn't six hundred and twelve now," said George. "It's about one hundred and sixty."

Fanny showed a momentary dismay. "Why, how—"

"I lent Uncle George two hundred; I gave fifty apiece to old Sam and those two other old darkies that worked for grandfather so long, and ten to each of the servants here—"

"And you gave me thirty-six," she said thoughtfully, "for the first month's rent, in advance."

"Did I? I'd forgotten. Well, with about a hundred and sixty in bank and our expenses a hundred a month, it doesn't seem as if this new place—"

"Still," she interrupted, "we have paid the first month's rent in advance, and it does seem to be the most practical—"

George rose. "See here, Aunt Fanny," he said decisively. "You stay here and look after the moving. Old Frank doesn't expect me until afternoon, this first day, but I'll go and see him now."

. . . It was early, and old Frank, just established at his big, flat-topped desk, was surprised when his prospective assistant and pupil walked in. He was pleased, as well as surprised, however, and rose, offering a cordial old hand. "The real flare!" he said. "The real flare for the law. That's right!

"The Real Flare for the Law."

Couldn't wait till afternoon to begin! I'm delighted that you—"

"I wanted to say—" George began, but his patron cut him off.

"Wait just a minute, my boy. I've prepared a little speech of welcome, and even though you're five hours ahead of time, I mean to deliver it. First of all, your grandfather was my old war comrade and my best client; for years I prospered through my connection with his business, and his grandson is welcome in my office and to my best efforts in his behalf. But I want to confess, Georgie, that during your earlier youth I may have had some slight feeling of—well, prejudice not altogether in your favor; but whatever slight feeling it was, it began to vanish on that afternoon, a good while ago, when you stood up to your Aunt Amelia Amberson as you did in the Major's library, and talked to her as a man and a gentleman should. I saw then what good stuff was in you—and I always wanted to mention it. I think you'll find an honest pleasure now in industry and frugality that wouldn't have come to you in a more frivolous career. The law is a jealous mistress and a stern mistress, but a—"

George had stood before him in great and increasing embarrassment, and he was unable to allow the address to proceed to its conclusion.

"I can't do it!" he burst out. "I can't take her for my mistress."

"What?"

"I've come to tell you, I've got to find something that's quicker. I can't—"

Old Frank got a little red. "Let's sit down," he said. "What's the trouble?"

George told him.

The old gentleman listened sympathetically, only murmuring: "Well, well!" from time to time, and nodding acquiescence.

"You see she's set her mind on this apartment," George explained. "She's got some old cronies there, and I guess she's been looking forward to the games of bridge and the kind of harmless gossip that goes on in such places. Really, it's a life she'd like better than anything else—better than that she's lived at home, I really believe. It struck me she's just about got to have it, and after all she could hardly have anything less."

"This comes pretty heavily upon me, you know," said old Frank. "I got her into that headlight company, and she fooled me about her resources as much as she did your Uncle George. I was never your father's adviser, if you remember, and when the insurance was turned over to her some other lawyer arranged it—probably your father's. But it comes pretty heavily on me, and I feel a certain responsibility."

"Not at all. I'm taking the responsibility." And George smiled with one corner of his mouth. "I'll tell you how it is, sir." He flushed, and, looking out of the streaked and smoky window beside which he was sitting, spoke with difficulty. "I feel as if—as if perhaps I had one or two pretty important things in my life to make up for. Well, I can't. I can't make them up to—to whom I would. It's struck me that, as I couldn't, I might be a little decent to somebody else, perhaps—if I could manage it! I never have been particularly decent to poor old Aunt Fanny."

"Oh, I don't know: I shouldn't say that. A little youthful teasing—I doubt if she's minded so much. It seems to me she's had a fairly comfortable life—up to now—if she was disposed to take it that way."

"But 'up to now' is the important thing," George said. "Now is now—and you see I can't wait two years to be admitted to the bar and begin to practice. I've got to start in at something else that pays from the start, and that's what I've come to you about. I have an idea, you see."

"Well, I'm glad of that!" said old Frank, smiling. "I can't think of anything just at this minute that pays from the start."

"I only know of one thing, myself."

"What is it?"

George flushed again, but managed to laugh at his own embarrassment. "I suppose I'm about as ignorant of business as anybody in the world," he said. "But I've heard they pay very high wages to people in dangerous trades; I've always heard they did, and I'm sure it must be true. I mean people that handle touchy chemicals or high explosives—men in dynamite factories, or who take things of that sort about the country in wagons, and shoot oil wells. I thought I'd see if you couldn't tell me something more about it, or else introduce me to some one who could, and then I thought I'd see if I couldn't get something of the kind to do as soon as possible. I wanted to get started today if I could."

Old Frank gave him a long stare. At first this scrutiny was sharply incredulous; then it was grave; finally it developed into a threat of overwhelming laughter; a forked vein in his forehead became more visible and his eyes seemed about to protrude.

But he controlled his impulse; and, rising, took up his hat and overcoat. "All right," he said. "If you'll promise not to get blown up, I'll go with you to see if we can find the job." Then, meaning what he said, but amazed that he did mean it, he added: "You certainly are the most practical young man I ever met!"

CHAPTER XXII.

They found the job. It needed an apprenticeship of only six weeks, during which period George was to receive fifteen dollars a week; after that he would get twenty-eight. This settled the apartment question, and Fanny was presently established in a greater contentment than she had known for a long time.

One of his Sunday walks, that spring, he made into a sour pilgrimage. It was a misty morning of belated snow slush, and suited him to a perfection of miserableness, as he stood before the great dripping department store which now occupied the big plot of ground where once had stood both the Amberson hotel and the Amberson opera house. From there he drifted to the old "Amberson block," but this was only a shadow. The old structure had not been replaced, but a caverhous entryway for trucks had been torn in its front, and upon the cornice, where the old separate metal letters had spelt "Amberson block," there was a long bill board sign: "Doogan Storage."

To spare himself, he went out National avenue and saw the piles of slush-covered wreckage where the Mansion and his mother's house had been, and where the Major's ill-fated five "new" houses had stood; for these were down, too, to make room for the great tenement already shaped in unending lines of foundation.

He turned away from the devastated site, thinking bitterly that the only Amberson mark still left upon the town was the name of the boulevard—Amberson boulevard. But he had reckoned without the city council of the new order, and by an unpleasant coincidence, while the thought was still in his mind, his eyes fell upon a metal oblong sign upon the lamp-post at the corner. There were two of these little signs upon the lamp-post, at an obtuse angle to each other, one to give passersby the name of National avenue, the other to acquaint them with Amberson boulevard. But the one upon which should have been stenciled "Amberson boulevard" exhibited the words "Tenth street."

George stared at it hard. Then he walked quickly along the boulevard to the next corner and looked at the little sign there. "Tenth street."

It had begun to rain, but George stood unheeding, staring at the little

"D—— Them!"

sign. "D— them!" he said finally, and, turning up his coat collar, plodded back through the soggy streets toward home."

The utilitarian impudence of the city authorities put a thought into his mind. A week earlier he had happened to stroll into the large parlor of the apartment house, finding it empty, and on the centertable he noticed a large, red-bound, gilt-edged book, newly printed, bearing the title: "A Civic History," and beneath the title, the rubric, "Biographies of the 500 Most Prominent Citizens and Families in the History of the City." He had glanced at it absently, merely noticing the title and subtitle, and wandered out of the room, thinking of other things and feeling no curiosity about the book. But he had thought of it several times since with a faint, vague uneasiness; and now when he entered the lobby he walked directly into the parlor where he had seen the book. The room was empty, as it always was on Sunday mornings, and the flamboyant volume was still upon the table—evidently a fixture as a sort of local Almanach de Gotha, or Burke, for the enlightenment of tenants and boarders.

He turned to the index where the names of the five hundred Most Prominent Citizens and Families in the History of the City were arranged in alphabetical order, and ran his finger down the column of A's: Abbett, Abbott, Abrams, Adams, Adams, Adler, Akers, Albertsmeyer, Alexander, Allen, Ambrose, Ambuhl, Anderson, Andrews, Appenbasch, Archer, Arszman, Ashcraft, Austin, Avey.

George's eyes remained for some time fixed on the thin space between the names "Allen" and "Ambrose." Then he closed the book quietly, and went up to his own room, agreeing with the elevator boy, on the way, that it was getting to be a mighty nasty wet and windy day outside.

The elevator boy noticed nothing unusual about him and neither did Fanny, when she came in from church with her hat ruined, an hour later. And yet something had happened—a thing which, years ago, had been the eagerest hope of many, many good citizens of the town. They had thought of it, longed for it, hoping acutely that they might live to see the day when it would come to pass. And now it had happened at last: Georgie Minafer had got his come-upance.

He had got it three times filled and running over. The city had rolled over his heart, burying it under, as it rolled over the Major's and buried it under. The city had rolled over the Ambersons and buried them under to the last vestige; and it mattered little that George guessed easily enough that most of the five hundred Most Prominent had paid something substantial "to defray the cost of steel engraving, etc."—the Five Hundred had heaved the final shovelful of soot upon that heap of obscurity wherein the Ambersons were lost forever from sight and history. "Quicksilver in a nest of cracks!"

Georgie Minafer had got his come-upance, but the people who had so longed for it were not there to see it, and they never knew it. Those who were still living had forgotten all about it and all about him.

* * * * * * *

George had seen Eugene only once since their calamitous encounter. They had passed on opposite sides of the street, downtown; each had been aware that the other was aware of him, and yet each kept his eyes straight forward, and neither had shown a perceptible alteration of countenance. It seemed to George that he felt emanating from the outwardly imperturbable person of his mother's old

(To Be Continued.)